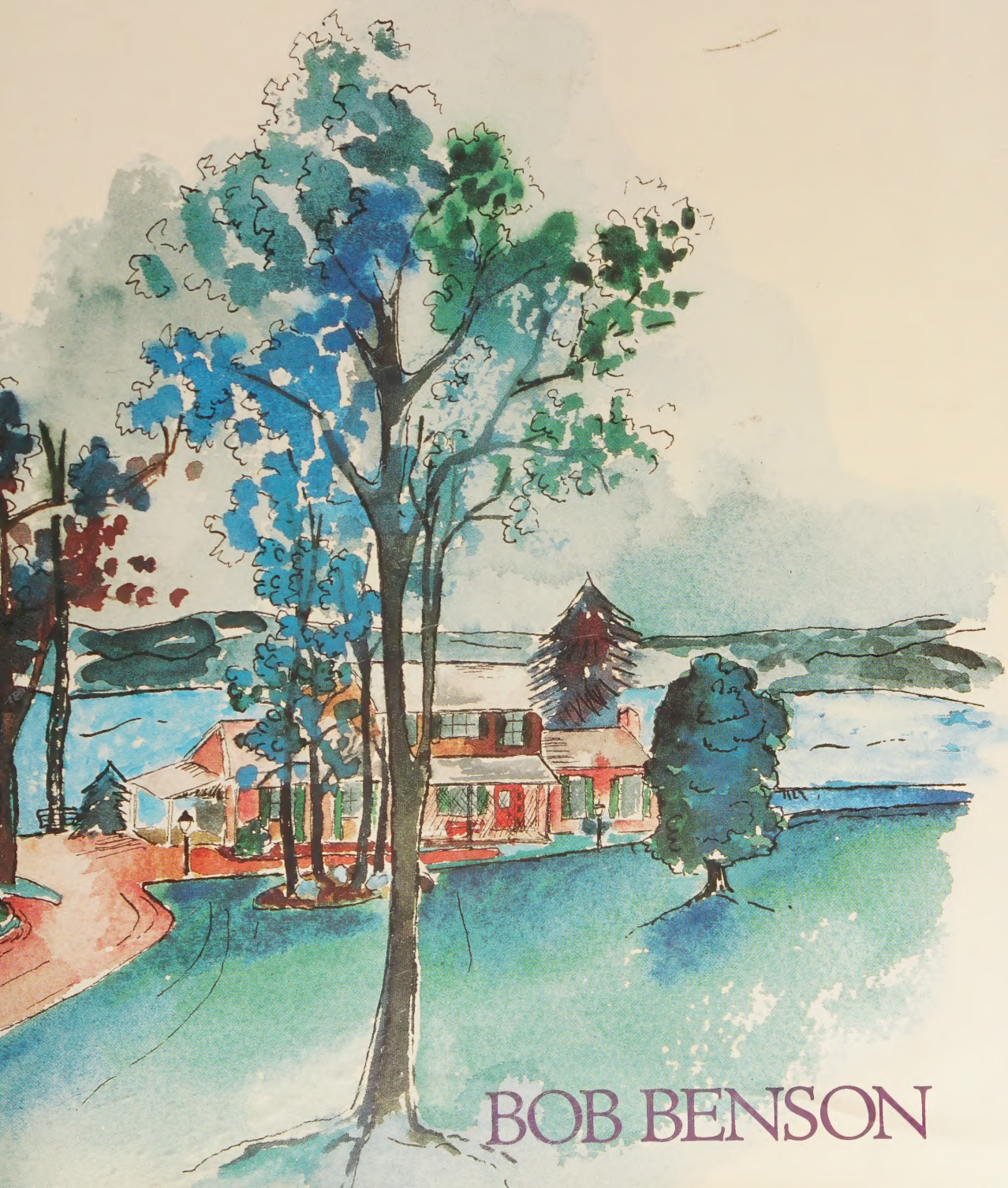
Laughter in the Walls



BOB BENSON

Laughter in the Walls

This is a collection of poems
that tells some stories—
and the story—
of a growing family,
of a loving father,
of a deeply-held faith.

It is rich with laughter,
powerfully inspirational,
and has long been treasured
by the author's readers
and family
and friends.

For some twenty years,
the book was out of print,
lost somewhere
in the stack of things
that publishers keep
but don't always publish.
Now it has found the light again.

Some new poems were added
to the collection
and some illustrations
by the poet's daughter
were added too.

But the promise to the reader
is the same one made
many years ago:
To bring some laughter—
and some tears
and some joy
and some insight into the ways
God speaks to us in
the daily events of life—
into the walls and hearts
of any house
where the book
makes its home.
Including yours.

Laughter in the Walls

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BOOKS BY BOB BENSON

Laughter In The Walls

Come Share The Being

Something's Going On Here

In Quest Of The Shared Life

He Speaks Softly

Disciplines For The Inner Life
(With Michael W. Benson)

"See you at the house."
(Edited by R. Benson)

Laughter in the Walls

BOB BENSON

Edited & Illustrated By Laura Leigh Benson-Greer

GENEROUX NELSON
Nashville

This book was originally published in 1969. For this revised edition, a small number of the original poems were replaced by a number of new poems written since the original collection was published. Some of those new poems first appeared in *Meanings*, a newsletter published from 1982-1986 by the author, and in *"See you at the house."*, a collection of the writer's best stories published in 1986 by Generoux, Inc.

The original watercolors are by Laura Leigh Benson-Greer.

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To those
who put it there.

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Foreword.

Normally, I am not the writer of the family.

However, I do have several important roles. Because of my many attempts to fix everything for everybody and to give further instruction to my ever-needy brothers, Dad pegged me early on as vice-mother. And I have done my best to live up to that title. Because of my tendency to trip at least twice a day, I am known as the family klutz. I have added a lot of creativity and class to that role through the years. Perhaps my best performance being the time I tripped on the sidewalk and fell headfirst into an electrician's tent, landing squarely in the electrician's lap.

I am also the painter of the family and so I was chosen to do the illustrations for this book. And because I am technically the editor as well, I was chosen to write the foreword for this revised edition of my father's first and most well-known book.

It was actually my brother Robert's idea that it would be neat to have some illustrations to go along with the poems and so he asked me to paint them. Anyone who knows me well knows that I am a chicken when it comes to showing my work to anyone, even members of my immediate family, so the idea of printing them in a book was scary to me. I decided to do it partly because it is difficult for anyone to pass up the chance to have their paintings in print.

Mostly though, I guess I wanted to do it because it gave me a way to work on a project with my dad and to say something about the life that we all had together when my brothers and I were growing up on Bayshore Drive.

I remember the past in terms of colors. Sunny golden days when we rolled down the hill in sleeping bags and carried picnics down to the patio at the lake. Windy gray days when we built tents in the hall upstairs and pretended to go camping. Soft green Saturdays in the spring when I would wake up and walk across the wet grass to where Dad was working in the garden so that I could get a good morning kiss. The crystal white day when Patrick first came home from the hospital by way of a tractor and a wheelbarrow over the snow.

So while there are better artists in the world, there are not other artists who remember what color these poems are.

I have always loved these poems for the memories that they bring to mind. But they have come to mean more than that to me now for they carry with them the truths that Dad spent his life trying to share with us–simple truths about living and about loving. Dad's gift was in knowing that the most important truths in life are realized in the midst of the ordinary, everyday experiences that we all have.

So, as I struggle to write the papers and read the books that come with being a graduate student and to do the laundry and pick up the stuff that comes with being a mother and to pack the books and move around the paperwork that comes with helping to run a small publishing company, I can hear the words of my father reminding me that none of these things are the important things about my life. What matters is the talks and the laughter and the tears and the songs and the walks and the colors that I share with my husband and my son and the time I spend being quiet enough to hear the voice of God.

Dad once said (in this very book, in fact) that he knew he was just a bit player in life and that he had only been given a few short lines in the play. And that he only hoped that he would say those lines well.

I know now, Dad, that the way you lived and the words you said taught me things I had only begun to realize at the time. And I thank you, Dad, for the lines well said and the life well lived.

And I thank you for the colors.

Laura Leigh Benson-Greer
April, 1990

The Things I Believe.

I've lain in the grass
on a soft spring morning
with life chirping
and buzzing around me.
And these were the things
I said to the buttercups
and the crocuses
and sang to the robins.

I've walked into a
dimly-lit room at night
illuminated only by the rays
of a Donald Duck night light.
And these were the things
I whispered
over the sleeping forms
of my little boys.

I was out to the edge
for a moment once,
out where they say
you have something
we don't have a cure for.
And faced with the separation
from loved ones,
with uncompleted tasks
and unfulfilled dreams,
these were the things
that brought me warmth
and hope
and comfort.

These are the things
that I believe about God.

I'm more than just toenails
and whiskers and elbows
and a social security number.
Way down deep inside
these things pull me together
and make me a "me."
I am a measure of the truth
that I have adopted.
And I have believed these things
until there is no distance
between me and them.
One by one
I have stripped away
doubts and questions
until I have possessed these truths
and they have possessed me.

And if you could put your ear
up tight against my heart
when trials and darkness
have stilled me to a whisper,
or if you were there
when joy burst forth
in such a loud song
that you had to back away,
these are the things
that you would hear
from my voice
and from my very being.

These are the things
that are really me,
they are the things I believe
about God.

Obligation.

When I was a little boy,
there was a time or two
I thought I had taken
all an eight-year-old
should have to take—
baths, yard-mowing,
trash-hauling, orders,
Sunday School, piano lessons,
and babysitting with sisters.
The only thing that kept me
from running away
was the fact
that Mom wouldn't let me
cross the street.
But I resolved to get a job,
or rather a position,
and pay them back for everything
they had ever done for me—
meals, bicycles,
swimming suits,
ballcaps, shoes,
skates, rent—
everything.
And then maybe
they would let me
run my own life.

But even then
I sorta wondered
how I'd put a price
on bedside vigils,
kisses and bandaids
for skinned knees and elbows,
on puzzles, games,
bedtime stories,
ice cream cones,
love, concern, worry, tears,
crackling fires in the winter,
fans in the summer,
and all the other things
so plainly above and beyond
the call of parental duty.

Almost daily I still find
some hidden attitude
or habit or value
that comes to me
because of a good name given.
And I am made to realize
an ever-deepening obligation
to share a heritage
with those
who call me Dad.

Life Is So Daily.

Nearly everything I do
needs doing again so soon.

Most everything I did today
has to be redone tomorrow
or at least
by the end of the week.
Shaving, eating,
driving to work,
cleaning the gutters,
building a fire,
answering the mail,
keeping up with the Joneses,
talking on the phone.

All these,
and a hundred other things,
make up my waking hours
day after day,
week after week.
Until at times it seems that
most of my life is spent
in a succession of marches
that do not matter
and numberless causes
that do not count.

And I am made to wonder:
Will I give myself away
bit by bit—
time, thought,
energy, love,
emotion, will—
to a collection
of choices and projects
which will die as I do,
because they mattered only
to me?

Somehow may I use
the lumber of my life
to build a ladder—
straight, sturdy, true—
on which people may climb
until they come to thee.
Or to fashion a cathedral—
a quiet, holy place
where people would pause
and seek thy ways.
Or to plant a tree—
tall, serene, fruitful—
whose shade would someday
grant a traveler rest.

Let me share
in thy works,
not asking that I must see
the results in my day,
but laboring
in this confidence:
Because it was done in thee,
it will someday
come to fulfillment
and I will not have lived
worthlessly, selfishly,
needlessly.

He Said His Lines.

One of our sons, Mike,
wanted to take private speech.

He's such a talker anyway,
I recommended *hush* instead.
But it was inexpensive
and he was interested,
so we let him.

The climax of the year's labor
was a two-hour assortment
of clowns, kings, rabbits,
and forgotten lines
known as the Speech Recital,
given to a devoted audience
of eager parents
and trapped friends.
Mike was a king.
He looked rather regal, too,
if I do say so myself.
At least until the queen,
a head taller and
twenty pounds heavier,
stood beside him
casting a pall on his regality.
He had only three lines to say—
nine months of speech,
three short lines.
And they came very late,
in the last moment
of the last act
of the very last play.

Anyway you looked at it,
he was not the star.
At least not to anyone except
a couple about halfway back
on the left side.

It was a long evening
and it was miserably hot.
But Mike waited
and he was ready
and he said his lines
and he said them well.
Not too soon, not too late,
not too loud, not too soft,
but just right,
he said his lines.

I'm just a bit player, too,
not a star in any way.
But God gave me a line or so
in the pageant of life,
and when the curtain falls
and the drama ends,
and the stage is vacant at last,
I don't ask for a critic's raves
or fame in any amount.
I only hope that he can say,
"He said his lines.
Not too soon, not too late,
not too loud, not too soft.
He said his lines
and he said them well."

Trophies And Tarnish.

You've had a good year, Bob.

A starting position,
a trip to the regionals,
trophies, medals, honors,
recognition from
your friends and teachers.
It was an impressive list
of accomplishments
for a sixteen-year-old.
And they were won
in open competition,
at a price in toil, study,
and sweat.
But trophies tarnish
and honors fade.
Already a sophomore has his eye
on jersey number thirty-four
and some kid
has made up his mind
to push you further back
in the class.

Sooner or later someone
will score more baskets,
and do better
than you have done.
So the important thing really
is not the deed well done
or the medal that you possess,
but the dedication and dreams
out of which they grow.

You must have a left-handed layup,
a behind-the-back pass,
a high percentage
from the line,
and a fall-away jumper.
But you must always have words
that stir the imagination,
thoughts that haunt your mind,
and dreams that fill your heart.

For out of dreams,
deeds grow.

Multiple Me's.

Most of the time it seems
there is just not enough of me
to go around.

At the office it is almost as if
I leave more to do
than I am ever able
to get done.
And when I'm home,
the yard,
the family,
the woodpile,
the garage
all seem to have
a rightful claim on my time.
All of the projects
I would like to be able
to begin,
the books I'd like to read,
could all be done
if there were only
more of me to do them.

But then there are times
where there are
just too many of me.
One of those times
is when I pray.
If only Bob the sincere,
the quiet,
the desirer of holy things
could make his way alone
to the place of prayer
and make his petitions known.

And there find
the power and poise
his heart must have.

But every time he goes to pray,
a whole multitude of me
comes trooping right along—
Bob the impatient,
Bob the referee heckler,
Bob the unconcerned,
and the ambitious Bob
and the unkind Bob.
And by the time
they all crowd into the closet,
there is such a din and clamor
that I can hardly hear
the voice of God.
And then I am made to see
that what I am in my thoughts,
at work,
at play,
in traffic,
all these people
make up the person I am
when I kneel down to pray.

Oh, that I would love him so dearly
that every moment of my life,
ease, thought, pain,
pleasure, toil, dreams—
would be but a preparation
for those times
when I shall be alone
with him.

Digging.

God and I raised a flower bed.

He really did the most I guess
because we used his soil,
his air, his water,
his life, his sun.
My part seemed so trivial
that I said,
"Lord, you take those bulbs
and make them grow
right here in the box
out in the garage.
You don't need me, Lord,
you can do it by yourself."
"No," he said,
"I want to do my part,
I'm waiting to begin,
but you must do yours too.
You'll have to
dig the bed,
bury the bulbs,
pull the weeds."
"Okay," I said,
and I did my feeble part.

And God took those bulbs,
burst them with life,
fed them with soil,
showered them with rain,
drew them with sunshine,
until we had beautiful flowers.
And then he seemed to say,
"Your life is like a garden,
And if you'd like,
we'll make it a beautiful thing.
I'll furnish the soil of grace,
the sunshine of love,
the rains of blessing,
the wonder of life,
but you must do the digging."

"Lord, you just go ahead,
make me what
you want me to be.
Make me a saint,
fill me with compassion,
give me great faith."
"No," he said,
"You've got to
keep your heart tilled,
hoe the weeds of evil,
chop away the second-best."

"I'll make you anything.
Pure, clean,
noble, useful,
anything you want to be.
But only if you dig."

Practicing The Presence.

A great composer hears music
and writes it down
that others may hear it too.
A great artist sees beauty
and puts it on a canvas
that others may enjoy it also.
A devout Christian feels a Presence
and lives their life
like they're not alone
that others may know him too.

People often pray:
"We beseech thee to come."
When the real prayer should be:
"Thou art here,
help me to sense it."

The simple truth is,
as a dimpled baby,
a mischievous child,
a perplexed teenager,
a harried adult,
you never leave
the presence of God
for he is always near.
The problem
is to know it.
Like inspiration
to the musician, the artist,
these times of awareness,
spiritual perception,
seem to come and go
in one's life.
And at times I am swept away
in the grace of communion,
the posture of praise.
Times of almost inexpressible joy,
overwhelming fellowship,
uncontrollable song.
They come not as often as I'd like,
not every time I wish it so.
But they come unannounced
like the calling winds,
the refreshing showers.
Then suddenly they're gone
and I am "me" again.
"Me" with a family to feed,
with a living to make.
But somehow "me"
a little stronger,
a little better,
for having been with him.
But I cannot help but wonder
what kind of person
I could be
if daily, hourly
or "alway-ly,"
I could learn to walk with him.

I Never Took A Step.

It was Pioneer Day.

Our town's answer to
the Rose Parade,
the All-Star Game,
the World's Fair,
and the Mardi Gras
all rolled into one colorful
but tiring day.
Between helping with the fish fry,
Peg's aid in the cake sale,
boys in the all-star games,
Mike in different costumes
for parade and pageant,
it was a very busy day.

I was on the sidewalk,
camera ready and focused
for Mike
who would come clowning
down the street.
I waited through bands,
army tanks, ponies,
majorettes, and floats
but no sign of Mike.
So I waited through motorcycles,
drill teams, Indians, stray dogs,
and a dozen other clowns,
but still no Mike.
I finally found Mike
at the parade's dispersal.

His face was a combination of
freckles, grease paint,
perspiration,
and shame.
"I chickened out," he said.
"How far did you ride?"
"I never took a step."

Suddenly, I remembered days
I'd started out
with high resolve
to carry the Master's banner
in the procession of life.
And nights that found me
defeated, discouraged,
ashamed,
knowing that I'd never
taken a step for him.
And remembering
the flood of compassion,
mercy, kindness and grace
which he gave,
I said to Mike,
"There will be other days
and other parades.
You're still the finest clown
I know."
Mike's face burst into smiles,
my heart burst into song,
and just for a moment I knew
the joy of Christlikeness.

Hearts And Treasures.

Spring is here.

The young are smitten with love,
the ground is
covered with greenery,
and the garage is
bursting with junk.
Where did it all come from
and where is it all going?

With the advent
of cleaning time,
attics everywhere
are "crowdedly testifying"
that as human beings
we are accumulators,
collectors, junk dealers.
And our assortment of goods—
whether it be hats, houses,
clothes, cameras,
furniture, lamps—
the Master called our treasure.

He didn't call it treasure
because of its usefulness.
Lovely chairs minus one leg,
lots of jars without any tops,
magazines old enough
to be in a barber shop.
And not because of its value
did he call it treasure.
They'd charge you to haul it off.

But treasure, he said,
because they are pictures
of places where you put
your heart for a while.
They were all things
you could not do without,
that you just had to have.
Remember the day
you signed the notes?
The painful monthly payments
to buy this collection of things
you no longer use?
They were treasures then,
but just like he said,
moths and time,
rust and kids,
thieves and the dog
have reduced them
to spring cleaning projects.
Basements, attics, carports,
eloquently echoing
the timeless words of the Master:
"Be careful what you treasure.
For where your treasure is
your heart will be."

The Big News.

The newspaper headlines
screamed the news.
Big, bold, black, front page—
SHEPARD SUCCESSFUL
IN VAULT INTO SPACE.
But the real news,
the big, big story,
was tucked away neatly
on the bottom corner
of page seven.
BENSON:
Mr. & Mrs. Robert G.,
111 Haven Street, Hendersonville,
Lori Leigh, born May 2nd,
Baptist Hospital.

There's nothing so important
about her, you say.
Well, she thinks there is.
She has completely
rescheduled the family,
taken over the den,
claimed a refrigerator shelf.

I think she's important too.
Important because she's mine.
Mine to love—
tiny fingers,
dimpled chin,
shining eyes.
Mine to care for—
food and thoughts,
clothes and faith,
school and habits.
She's plenty important to me.

She's important to God, too,
important because she's his.
Yes, Lori Leigh
and Kathi Ann,
James Alan,
Terri Leah,
and all of the seventeen new folk
on the cradle roll.
For people
are more important to God
than accomplishments.
What does he care
about moonshots,
world championships,
space rides?
These are just
deeds to be outdone,
records to be broken,
events to be overshadowed.
But these little folk
will dwell with him forever.

The big story is not always
on the front page.
The real news,
the big stories,
are about people.
People like Lori Leigh.

Tardiness.

You were late
but I wasn't alarmed
because you are always late.
I can't exactly remember
if you made the wedding
on time
but if per chance
you did come down
the aisle promptly,
it was one of the last times.

You said you'd meet me
at seven
and we'd have dinner,
just the two of us.
So I laid out enough work
to last until seven-thirty.
Seven came
but you didn't.
The clock said seven forty-five
but the empty street below
said you hadn't arrived
and I found myself
leaning back in my chair
with the work pushed aside,
looking up the street
for the station wagon
and you.

Surprising how much
of one's life
can go by
in a few minutes.
Flashbacks of meetings
we had had after work,
for lunch,
home from traveling,
after an hour,
after a day,
after a week.
But every time
with the same little quickness
in my throat
that I felt as I waited
for you now for dinner.

You came
and we ate,
laughed and talked
and went home.
And you,
who probably knows me
better than anyone else
in the world,
didn't even suspect
what it meant to me
to see you
coming down the street
at seven forty-seven.

Instant Obedience.

There are three ways
to get to our dining room—
up from the living room,
through the hall,
or in from the kitchen.
The conventional route
to the breakfast table
is down the stairs,
through the hall,
and there you are.
It's the easiest, it's closest,
you just keep bearing right
and lean your way in.
The other morning
when Peg called,
I was first to come down to eat.
Bobby, Mike, & Leigh followed.
On impulse I stood up
on Leigh's highchair
in the corner,
ready to surprise them
as they came through the hall.
I heard them
thunder down the steps,
my muscles tensed
for the pounce.
For reasons unknown to me,
they made a hard left turn
and I had been flanked.
But I was up there so I just stayed
trying to look as if
I were waiting for a trolley
or something sensible.
Bobby and Mike,
eleven and eight,
sophisticated men of the world,
ignored me completely.
But two-year-old Leigh
smiled and said,
"Hi, Dad. Whatcha doing?"
Now it's not too easy
to explain why at 7:20 a.m.,
you, a responsible adult,
are standing, of all places,
in a highchair.
"Leigh, I'm waiting up here
to jump on you.
Lie down. Here I come,
right in the middle
of your tummy."
Quick as a flash
she was down on the floor.
In another instant
I sat beside her,
rejoicing in this tribute
of confidence, devotion,
and trust
in one of her dad's plans
for the moment.

O Lord, help me
to love you so much
to trust you so completely,
that if you said,
"Lie down, boy,
I'm going to
run over you,"
I too would obey
instantly—completely.
May the quality
of my devotion
and the depth
of my confidence
make thy great heart glad.

Paternal Instinct.

"Tom," I said
as I looked down at him,
"You can't say a word,
or play a game,
or put on your shirt,
or fix your supper.
You don't have a car or a job
or go to school—
and besides,
you're expensive.
The price of babies
seems to be steadily rising
since '52—Bobby,
'56—Michael,
'61—Leigh.
You'd think I'd
get some discount.
"And, Tom,
you're time-consuming.
You won't eat
what the rest of us do
or when, either.
There you are,
my new son,
just a helpless, broke,
expensive, noisy
bundle of humanity.
But you can be
a happy baby,
an active boy,
an exuberant teenager,
a useful man,
if someone will take the time
to feed you, clothe you,
guide you, teach you,
paddle you, love you,
train you.
For you are also one of life's
choice opportunities,
a rich and challenging way
in which to serve God.
If I fail you,
there is no way
for me to be
a real success.
But if I train you well—
in wisdom,
in faith,
in courage,
in honesty—
I will have risen above
all other failures."

With these great odds at stake,
my heart is made to pray:

O thou, who through
thy miracle of life
hast bestowed
this honor on me,
grant me
one more request:
Give me thy grace,
thy understanding,
thy love.
Make me a father like thee.

Prejudice.

Everybody says
our newest son,
Patrick Copeland Benson,
is a strikingly beautiful baby.
I readily agree
but then I do have a question
about my judgment
because I thought all of our children
were beautiful babies.
I felt that Bobby, our first-born,
was the handsomest thing
I had ever seen anywhere.
But fourteen years later,
as I look at snapshots
of his tiny face,
I either had a very cheap camera
or he was just barely average.
But at the time,
as a proud new father,
I saw him with eyes
so completely prejudiced
and blinded by love,
it was pure delight
to look at him.

And it brings no end
of consolation and strength
to my heart
to remember that when
the heavenly Father
looks at me,
he doesn't see
the modest victories,
resounding defeats,
courageous aspirations,
faltering results,
noble motives,
shabby attitudes,
optimistic starts,
and discouraging stops
that are so much
a part of me.

But he looks
through eyes of love.
And in his sight
I am transformed
to a useful, worthy,
noble being.

Shadow.

From the time little boys are born
until they are three or so,
they belong to their moms.
But the next three years
belong to their dad.
I have one of those
three plus-ers at my house.
If I wear a shirt,
he wears a shirt.
If I go barefooted,
he goes barefooted.
If I read, he reads.
If I dig, he digs.
He doesn't ask to go fishing
or to the park or swimming,
it seems enough for him
just to be with me.
I look forward to the weekends
with delight
because he will not be more
than three steps behind me.

When life beats me down a bit
and I lose the confidence
to lead,
to master,
to choose,
I sometimes come home
and just walk around the yard
with Tom
a step or two behind.
Somehow just to feel
his trust,
his confidence,
his devotion,
gives me strength
to try some more.

You can't fool a little boy
about character
and I just accept his judgment
that there must be
something to me after all.

Laughter In The Walls.

I pass a lot of houses
on my way home.
Some pretty,
some expensive,
some inviting.

But my heart always skips a beat
when I turn down the road
and see my house
nestled against the hill.

I guess I'm especially proud
of the house
and the way it looks
because I drew the plans myself.
It started out large enough for us—
I even had a study,
two teenage boys
now reside in there.
And it had a guest room,
my girl and nine dolls
are permanent guests.
It had a small room
Peg had hoped
would be her sewing room,
the two boys swinging
on the dutch door
have claimed this room
as their own.

So it really doesn't look right now
as if I'm much of an architect.
But it will get larger again.

One by one they will go away—
to work, to college,
to service,
to their own houses.
And then there will be room—
a guest room, a study,
and a sewing room—
for just the two of us.

But it won't be empty.
Every corner, every room,
every nick in the coffee table
will be crowded
with memories.
Memories of picnics,
parties, Christmases,
bedside vigils, summers,
fires, winters, going barefoot,
leaving for vacation, cats,
conversations, black eyes,
graduations, first dates,
ballgames, arguments,
washing dishes, bicycles,
dogs, boat rides,
getting home from vacation,
meals, rabbits,
and a thousand other things
that fill the lives
of those who would raise five.
And Peg and I
will sit quietly by the fire
and listen to the
laughter in the walls.

Second Helpings.

His prayers
are not always the same.
Some nights he prays,
"Now I lay me
down to sleep..."
Simple words,
but words of dignity
from his young heart.
Other nights he begins,
"Our Father
which art in heaven..."
And he perfectly repeats those
beautiful life-giving words.
But the nights I like best
are the nights
he extemporizes
and this was one
of those choice nights.
As a parent your heart leaps
from laughter to tears
and back again.
"Lord," he prayed,
"Give us this day..."
Stymied momentarily, he paused.
Then in a flash of insight
he resumed,
"Lord, give us
some other days too."
Later on
I found myself echoing
this bit of seven-year-old wisdom,
"Give me some tomorrows
too, Lord."
But at our house
we have a rule
which now marched erect
past me.
No extras,
no "mores,"
no "seconds,"
until the "firsts" are gone.
No more bacon
until you've downed the egg.
No more steak
until you eat the spinach.
And now this rule
that I had made for them
thrust itself on me.
Do I deserve another day,
another set of blessings?
Is today's plate clean?
Twenty-four hours,
fourteen hundred and
forty minutes,
eighty-six thousand and
four hundred seconds—
all mine.
To use, to abuse,
to account for.

Oh, Lord,
help me to take today.
May I, with dedication,
use its opportunities,
accept the reverses,
share its burdens.
May I be
thankful for its graces,
humble in its successes,
devoted to its Giver.
May I, in some measure,
earn tomorrow
by the way I live
today.

Openhandedness.

There is something about fall—
the turning trees,
the crisp nights,
the clear mornings,
the football games,
the chrysanthemums—
that makes me feel
I like her best
of all the seasons.
At least I always think so
after a long, hot summer.

And yet with all her beauty—
trees, flowers
and her sweet relief
from heat and grass cutting—
she arouses in my heart
a faint sadness, a poignancy.
As the year
heads down the stretch
and the days grow shorter,
she seems to quietly say,
"There's a time to plant,
a time to grow,
a time for winter's blast."

I learned this feeling early,
this sense of "mortalness."
When I was a boy,
there was no joy
quite like that which
a sunny Saturday morning
brought.

There was fishing and games
and swimming
and cowboys and Indians
and mud between your toes.
But the hours raced by
and in my childish heart
I knew there was
a time to play,
to swim, to run, to laugh,
but the darkness was coming
and the bathtub waited,
and I felt an inner pain
because I could not halt
the day.

And I know it now.
I look at them—
Bob, Mike, Leigh, Tom, Pat—
seated around my table
and my heart wells up
with pride, joy, happiness
marred only by this faint pang,
that the moments
I clutch to myself
are so swiftly passing by.
Oh, to be able
to release these moments
into his hand.
Gladly, unbegrudgingly, freely,
like a tree sheds its leaves.
Happy, secure, in this certainty—
that in his plan
there's always another spring.

Parental Math.

Nearly a week ago, Peg and I
had a very hard week.

Wednesday night—
Mike slept downstairs
in his room
where children belong
and we slept upstairs in ours
where moms and dads belong.
Thursday night—
We were 350 miles away
and he was in Ramada 325
and we were in 323
in connecting rooms
and we left the door open
and talked and laughed
together.
Friday night—
700 miles from home
and he was in 247
and we were in 239 but it was
just down the balcony
and somehow
we seemed together.

Saturday night—
He was in the freshman dorm
and we were still in 239.
Sunday night—
We were home
and he was 700 miles away
in Chapman 309.

Now we have
been through this before.
Robert had gone away to college
and we had gathered
ourselves together
until we had gotten over it.
Mainly because
he is married now
and he only lives ten miles away
and comes to visit often.

So we thought we knew
how to handle separation
pretty well
but we came away so lonely
and blue.

Oh, our hearts
are filled with pride
at a fine young man
and our minds
are filled with memories
from tricycles
to commencements
but deep down inside somewhere
we just ached
with loneliness and pain.

Somebody said
you still have three at home.
Three fine kids and
there is still plenty of noise,
plenty of ballgames to go to,
plenty of responsibilities,
plenty of laughter.
Plenty of everything,
except Mike.

And in parental math,
five minus one
just doesn't equal plenty.

And I was thinking about God.
He sure has plenty
of children.
Plenty of artists,
plenty of singers
and carpenters
and candlestick makers
and preachers.
Plenty of everybody,
except you.
And all of them together
can never take your place.
And there will always be
an empty spot in his heart
and a vacant chair at his table
when you're not home.

And if once in a while
it seems as if
he's crowding you a bit,
try to forgive him.
It may be one of those nights
when he misses you so much
he can hardly stand it.

Skipping Rocks.

It was a bright,
sunshiny morning,
the first of ten days off for me.
And I was out in the yard early,
working on a wall
down by the lake.
Knee deep
in pleasant, warm water,
I could hardly have been happier
or more at peace.

Patrick came down
and began to throw rocks
in the water.
You don't have to teach
little boys to throw rocks,
they just seem to be born
with both the skill
and the desire.
He wanted me
to stop and play with him,
"Teach me how
to make them skip."
"In a little while," I said.
"Let me get a little more
of this wall built."
After a while,
he got tired of waiting
and started up the hill
to the house.
I figured he'd be back
in a few minutes.

But later in the morning
when I went up for a drink,
he was in bed
with a high fever.
It turned out to be
a very serious illness
that was to spread
through the whole family,
not to mention my vacation.
It took some of us to the hospital
and all of us to bed.
Fortunately for us,
it was all over
in a month or so,
having run its course
with no lingering effects.
And there have been other days
and other chances
to skip rocks with Patrick.

But I can still see him
trudging up that hill,
a long pull for his short legs,
and I'm reminded
that you never know
they're coming back.
There aren't any guarantees.
And the only time
you really know
you can skip rocks
is when you're saying
"in a little while."

Disparity.

I started to pull them up
and throw them away—
the brown, lifeless remains
of twelve shrubs.

I had planted them
with pride and expectation.
Now they were slain
by our severest winter
of the century.
But like most things I do,
I put it off.
And March brought
some bright sunshine,
the spring rain,
a few warm nights.
And somehow,
unbeknownst to me,
life—
wondrous, mysterious, thrilling—
burst out of those brown stems
until they, like all the world—
the trees, grass, buttercups—
seemed to be saying,
in spring's glorious message,
"I love to live!"

People, too, have this
ingrained love for life,
a desire to remain,
a dread of dying.
History is filled with stories
of men and women
with nothing left to live for.
Possessions, health, friends,
family, future, all gone.
But they clung to life dearly,
grimly they tied
one more knot
in the end of the rope.
It runs deep, this desire
for self-preservation,
this dread of being snuffed out.

Then how do you explain
a young man just thirty-three,
in the prime of life,
setting his face
toward Jerusalem to die.
The birds were happily warbling
their songs of spring,
but he walked
serenely,
resolutely,
triumphantly,
to a cross and death—
cruel, agonizing,
undeserved death.

"Herein is love...
not that we loved him...
But that he loved us...
the recompense
for our sins."

Dedication.

Most of my writing
is dedicated to Peg,
of course.

An old-fashioned girl
who said old-fashioned words
with me—
to love and to cherish.
And who has done so with style—
for better, for worse,
for richer and for poorer
in sickness and in health—
for three decades
of our quest.
After all these years,
five dear children,
five grandchildren,
fourteen jobs,
five pastorates,
fifteen moves later...
it caught us by surprise.

We took each other's hands
and clenched them together
until our knuckles were white,
knowing full well
that we might not be able
to hold on
in spite of our resolve.

So we relaxed our grip
and gently held hands
in a loving, releasing way
and suddenly
we became more tightly bound
than ever before.

By letting go,
we held on.
By standing back,
we drew closer.
By ceasing to clutch tomorrow,
there is nothing like today.

Peeking At A Miracle.

Lacey, you made us stay up all night.

And for a grandfather
that is not as easy
as it used to be.
Finally, at 4:10 a.m. or so,
Jacquelynn Lacey Benson,
to address you properly
by your full name,
your mom headed for the room
where you would be
"delivered."

So there we all were,
a bedraggled bunch,
filled with cups and cups
of vending machine coffee
and hours and hours
of CNN headline news.
An assortment of
maternal and paternal
grandmothers, grandfathers,
aunts, uncles, and friends
trying to look through
two tiny windows
in the big doors that stood guard
over the long corridor.

We watched your mom
roll out of her room,
she disappeared around a corner
past the nurses' station.

We saw them dress your dad up
like a spaceman—
white crinkly overalls,
green hat and mask,
big, blue booties.
Then the hall was empty
and quiet.

Now the intensity
of the waiting picked up.
I am sure the intensity
of the "delivering"
was picking up too.
"I want to see the baby."
"I think it will be a girl."
"I can't wait."
An eternity of almost
twenty minutes went by
and then around the corner
you came,
nestled in the right arm
of your father,
whose mask had been removed
to reveal an enormous smile
of pride, awe and relief.
"It's a girl! Everybody is fine."

We crowded around for
our first glimpse of you,
love at first sight
I must confess.
Your mom's nose,

your dad's dimple
on the miniature face
instantly devastated us all
before the nurse
gently led the entourage
on to the nursery door.
You and the nurse went inside.
The rest of us
hurried around to a window
where they promised
you would soon reappear.

I was standing with your daddy.
I guess I ought to warn you
about him.
He is as quick as a flash,
never without a retort
filled with humor.
He will have you laughing
a hundred thousand times
before he finally has to say,
in answer to some
preacher's question,
"Her mother and I."
But for this moment,
his mirth was gone,
swallowed up
by the deep sanctity
of the miracle
that had recently transpired
before his very eyes.
"I have never seen anything
quite like that before,"
were his quiet, reverent words.

I thought how right he was,
remembering mornings
in this very hospital
when the birthings of children
of my own,
including Tom,
had reconfirmed
the miracle of life.

For better or worse,
your dad has lived
in the era of television,
when the world has become,
as one described it,
a "19-inch neighborhood."
He has seen everything else—
murders, beatings,
men on the moon,
rapes, robberies,
men dying in battle,
fires in California,
starvation in India,
and riots and wrecks
and hostage taking.

Thank you, Lacey,
for reminding your dad,
as well as the rest of us,
life is the real miracle.

A Sweet Gum Tree.

It was a lovely summer morning.

The sky was blue,
the sun shining,
the breezes blowing.
It had been a hard week,
replete with details,
frustration,
and late evening work.
And this day
I couldn't get moving.
I was tired, nervous,
just plain beat.
I made several starts at work
but kept ending up
on the front porch,
piled on the lounge.
Lying there,
I looked at the wind blow
through the treetops.

Close by the front porch
stands a sweet gum tree.
It looks as if at one time
something nearly killed it
until now it is
a strange combination
of the lovely and the grotesque.
A part of the tree is alive,
drinking in the rain,
reaching for the sunshine,
playing in the breezes.
And part of it is dead,
unmoved, unfeeling,
untouched
by the wonderful graces
of God.

A sweet gum tree quietly
showing me the way I was,
in stark contrast
to the way that God
through his Spirit
meant me to be.
A sweet gum tree causing me
to breathe this prayer:

So fill me with thy life
that I shall
feel thy slightest touch,
hear thy softest whisper,
see thy faintest footprint,
yielding in
such glad response
that others might see
the grace and beauty
of communion
with thee.

All Them New Things.

Let me brag a little.

I have a grandson named
Robert Green Benson III.
Now in case you're not big
on family trees,
that makes me
Robert Green Benson, Sr.
And I have a son,
Robert Green Benson, Jr.,
and a grandson named
Robert Green Benson III.

Before he was born
we were duly notified
that in the event
the baby was a boy
he would be so named
and we were to call him
Robert.
Peering across the gap
between the generations
I took this to mean
we were not to make
the same mistake
of re-using such terms
as Bobby or Little Bobby
or Baby Bobby,
it was to be *Robert.*
It seemed like quite a handle to me
for less than ten pounds
of humanity.
It seemed very awkward to say,
"Goochy-goochy, *Robert.*"

But Robert it was.
Until somebody
started calling him "Pookie"
or just "Pook" for short.
Now Bobby sounds better to me
than Pookie
but then
what do grandfathers know?

A little while
after Robert was born,
Tom, my ten-year-old,
said to his mom,
"Robert sure is lucky."
And Peg wanted to know

why Robert was so lucky
in Tom's mind.
"Because he gets to do
all them new things."
And now she wanted to know
what all those new things were
that Tom was referring to.
"Well," Tom began,
"he's never climbed a tree
or waded in the lake
or run through a field
or felt the wind in his face
or ridden a bicycle—
all them new things."

And later I was thinking
about all of God's children
and about our life in the Spirit.
About all the wonderful surprises
and stupendous things
he has for all of us to do
and see and feel and be
and how we just sit down
where we came in.
And about how we have
all the questions
and all the answers
and know all the things
to say and sing.
And about how we know
all the steps and plans
for everybody else
and their children too.
And about how we
rigidize and dilute.
And I wonder
how many new joys
and insights
and ways of punching holes
in the darkness
and poems and songs
and smiles
and simple pleasures
we miss.

Because we cannot
begin to conceive
how lucky we are.
Because in him there are
"all them new things."

Synopsis.

To look at me,
138 pounds of pure dynamite,
you'd never know
I used to be sickly.
But it's true,
I had them all—
scarlet fever, flu,
mumps, measles, hives,
pneumonia, asthma
and a hundred others.
It seemed to me
I was the first to catch it
and the last to let it go.
During those days of quiet,
I learned to love to read.
As a boy
I sailed the high seas,
braved raging storms,
hacked through jungles,
and explored dark caves
in hot pursuit of
the Hardy Boys,
Tow Sawyer,
Nancy Drew,
and other assorted heroes.
They always caught the villain,
rescued the baby,
won the battle,
found the money,
and lived happily
ever afterwards.
As I grew older
I began to read books
in which the hero died
or the wrong guy married
the fair young princess.
You know the kind,
books with true-life endings.
I guess I'm sentimental,
even childish,
but I like books that end well.
Let the hero
be down and nearly out,
shot and left for dead,
but let him win in the end.

And so I like the Bible
because it ends well.
It begins with the heroes
in a sinless, deathless land.
But they tripped, fell and
began a downward journey
that led through misery,
failure, sorrow,
and shame,
until finally you say
they'll never make it back.
But when it ends,
they're home again.
It took God's Son to do it,
but it ends well.
In these days,
with the world divided
into two camps
glaring back and forth
like two little boys
across a line in the dust,
with hatred, strife,
wars and rumors,
it's nice to know
that the One who
started it well
will also see that it ends
according to his plan.

Days And Decades.

Where did they go,
the days and the decades?

Days so filled with goodness
we lived them like
they always would be.
Days that brought
such tiredness and hurt
we thought
they would not pass.
Days when we scarcely knew
whether to laugh or cry
because they marked
beginnings and endings.
And decades that sped by
so quickly
you had hardly learned to say 60
when it was suddenly
70 instead.
Decades marked
in feet and inches in the hall.
Decades that brought
peace and wisdom
and shortness of breath.

Where did they go,
the days and the decades?
Yesterday they were dependent
on us for everything—
for counsel and protection.
Not long ago he wanted a bicycle,
now he has
a nine-year-old of his own.
Yesterday this one
was squirming in church,
last night he led the family
in Christmas worship
and communion.

Last night I put her to bed,
tucked her in
with her dolls and bears,
now she's studying
to be a doctor.
And the blonde,
when I was in the yard
on Saturdays,
he stayed beside me,
now he has packed his truck
and gone.
And the one
we keep calling the "baby"
is nearly seventeen.

Where did they go,
the days and the decades?
They went to see Saint Nick
and the tooth fairy
and to ballgames and weddings
and seminary and to work,
to Chicago and home again,
on vacation to state parks
and Europe,
to college and Colorado
and camp.
To parties and malls and hospitals
and hundreds of other places
where they are beyond retrieval
even if I went again to look.
But a place to which
they have also gone
is among the treasures
of my heart,
filling my memory
with richness and joy.
Gone indeed, but forever mine,
the days and the decades.

About Bob Benson.

Bob Benson was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1930, the son of a religious music publisher, the grandson of a charter member of the Church of the Nazarene. He was educated, for the most part, at Nazarene schools, including the Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City. He was an ordained minister in the church and held pastorates in Florida, Missouri, California, and Tennessee.

In the early sixties, he returned to Nashville and joined his father in the family publishing business. Over the next twenty years, he became one of the Christian world's leading publishing executives. His efforts at the John T. Benson Publishing Company were characterized by a deep sensitivity for the quality of the published product and a pronounced emphasis on the quality of the ministry of the product itself.

Along the way, he came to be highly sought after as a speaker for retreats, conferences, and college campuses because of his warmth, his dry wit, and his keen insight. His unique ability to see the deep spiritual truths in the everyday occurrences of life earned him a place in the hearts of the thousands of people who heard him speak all over the country. As his reputation as a speaker grew, he began to write, publishing six books and a monthly newsletter over the course of his career.

In the late seventies, a sense of calling to spend his days speaking and writing on a full-time basis led him to resign from the publishing company. For a little more than six years, he traveled and wrote.

For many of the country's Christian artists and writers, as well as for pastors and lay leaders everywhere, Bob Benson was a friend, counselor, sounding board, chaplain, fellow pilgrim, and comrade-in-arms in the struggle to punch as many holes in the darkness as they could. He laughed with, created with, argued with, prayed with, corresponded with, and retreated with enough of them to earn a place that few others will ever achieve.

In March, 1986, he finally lost one last battle to cancer, which he had fought valiantly for more than a dozen years. He, of course, would say that he won the war.

About Laura Leigh Benson-Greer.

Laura Leigh Benson-Greer is the only daughter, and therefore by her brothers' reckoning, was quite likely the favorite child of Bob Benson and easily the favorite sibling of the brothers themselves.

She paints watercolors professionally on commission, studies pastoral care at Vanderbilt Divinity School, writes term papers and sermons and other things worth reading, manages significant portions of the work of Generoux, and makes plans for a home that she and her musician husband and their son will someday build at the family farm north of Nashville.

She also collects hats with a passion, drives a pickup with style and grace, holds the title of most revered aunt to Peggy's grandchildren by acclamation, and continues her role of vice-mother to the aforementioned, and very grateful, brothers with a good deal of style and cheer.

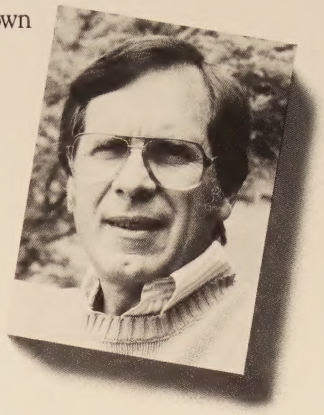
About Generoux, Inc.

Generoux is a small Christian press formed to create platforms for uniquely gifted writers and speakers who might otherwise go unpublished and unheard. The company takes its name from the French word that means *openhandedness*—a favorite theme of its founding spirit, Bob Benson. For more information about Generoux, its writers, publications, and retreats, or to be placed on their mailing list, please contact Generoux, Inc., Post Office Box 158531, Nashville, Tennessee 37215 or telephone 615.889.8306.

About the poet.

Bob Benson was a well-known retreat and conference speaker, author of six books and Christian music publishing executive from Nashville.

The last fourteen years of his life, six of them spent speaking and writing full-time, he struggled with the cancer which finally claimed his life in March of 1986.



He was known and loved by his audience, friends and colleagues for his wit, sensitivity, gentle spirit, keen insight and deep devotion to the life of the spirit.

Laughter In The Walls was his first book.

About the illustrator/editor.

Laura Leigh Benson-Greer is the only daughter of Bob Benson.

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About Generoux, Inc.

Generoux is a small Christian press formed to create platforms for uniquely gifted writers and speakers who might otherwise go unpublished and unheard. The company takes its name from the French word meaning *openhandedness*—a favorite theme of its founding spirit, Bob Benson.

For more information about Generoux, its writers, publications and retreats or to be placed on their mailing list, please contact Generoux, Inc., Post Office Box 158531, Nashville, Tennessee 37215 or telephone 615.889.8306.

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When I find something
that is meaningful to me,
I have a pretty good idea
that somebody else
might find it useful as well.

My good friend, Bob Benson,
had an ability to tell a story
better than anyone that I know.
His words always touch me.
I hope you take the time
to just lean back,
maybe with some hot chocolate
or a cup of coffee,
and let the Lord speak to you
through what Bob has to say.

Dr. James Dobson
As quoted on the
FOCUS ON THE FAMILY
Radio Broadcast

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